

Using Local Groups to Prevent Looting

An Example from Western Sweden

In 1995, a prehistoric solid gold torque (necklace), found in Vittene, Västra Götaland, western Sweden, was reported to the Älvsborg County Museum. Archeologists surveyed the area with metal detectors and discovered four more gold objects near the torque findspot. The Vittene hoard, one of the biggest prehistoric gold treasures found in Sweden, was complete. Naturally, it attracted attention, both good and bad. The Vittene case study demonstrates the value of enlisting local history groups in protecting sites. An overview of legislation concerning prehistoric monuments, sites, and objects is relevant to understanding Swedish legal protections.

The first legislation concerning prehistoric monuments was passed in Sweden in 1666, when the country was one of the major powers in northern Europe. The law stipulated that the state assumed ownership of all precious objects found in the ground. Prehistoric remains have been well protected ever since. Currently, prehistoric artifacts found in Sweden must be turned over to the state cultural heritage management. If objects made of precious metal are found in places where no monuments or sites are registered, the finder receives a reward based upon the metal value of the object. A symbolic supplement to the value is also added; the symbolic premium to the Vittene torque was about five times its gold value.

In the 1980s much metal-detector looting took place on Gotland and Öland in the Baltic Sea, islands rich in precious metals. The looting created great

national concern about preserving prehistoric resources, so legislation was amended to prohibit the use of metal detectors on Gotland and Öland. Later, the prohibition was expanded to include all of Sweden. Although the law does not forbid owning a metal detector, the local county administrative board must give permission to use it.

Government authorities considered the Vittene site secure after the primary metal-detector survey was carried out in 1995. Initially, the media were not informed about the exact provenance of the treasure, but after the survey a press conference was held on the site. During the spring of 1996, however, visitors to the site discovered that looters using metal detectors had

A map of northern Europe showing the islands of Öland and Gotland in the Baltic Sea and Vittene on the western part of the Swedish mainland. Illustration by Samuel Björklund and Leif Häggström, Jönköping County Museum, Sweden.

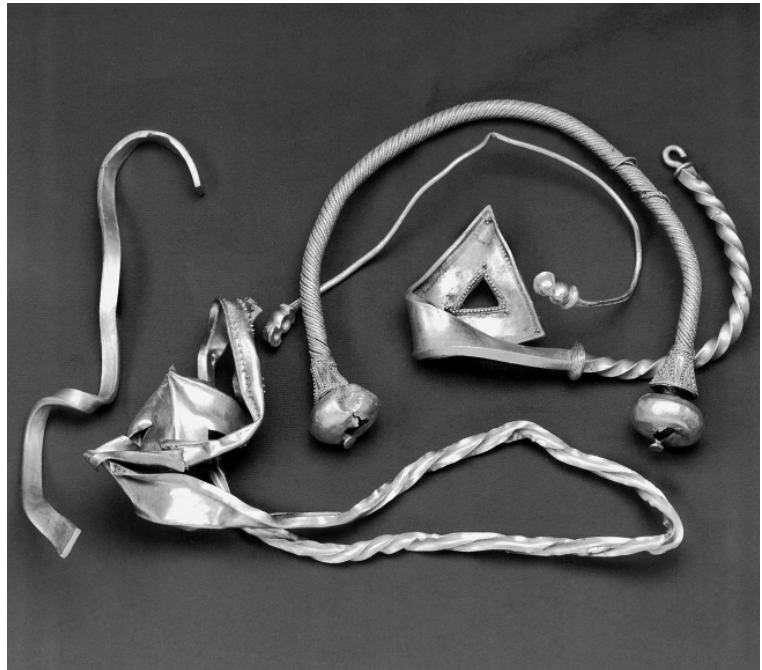


The Vittene hoard, dated to the 1st century A.D. Photo by Ola Eriksson, Älvsborg County Museum, Sweden.

damaged the area. As the looters had not bothered to fill in the holes, their activity was obvious: some 50 spade-dug holes covered the most archeologically interesting field. Government authorities began to talk to local residents, who provided relevant information. First, the nearest neighbor had been having problems with the motion detectors on his own property during the winter. Someone had been manipulating the detectors' settings. Further, a local photographer who lived about a mile away was sitting in his study late at night when he observed strange lights moving about on the looted field. He did not reflect upon the event until he read about the looting in a local newspaper.

Because of the looting, the investigators pursued an innovative strategy: they began collaborating with local history groups, which are common in Sweden. Often these groups cover only a single parish and they show a friendly rivalry towards similar groups in parishes nearby. Investigators worked hard to meet with and invigorate groups in the looted area, resulting in useful information concerning significant but previously unknown sites. Through contact with investigators and the county museum, the locals became more aware of the cultural landscape in which they live and they also learned to be more observant of suspicious activities in the area. A local military officer even offered to call in soldiers to patrol the area—the offer was declined.

Despite this increased cooperation, two more looted sites were discovered 2 years later when archeologists widened their metal detector survey in the area. One of the new sites was fairly remote, about a mile from the Vittene site. Here, the looters probably worked undisturbed at night by flashlight. The discovery of the second looted site was quite alarming. Near a medieval church, the site was similar to late Iron Age graves in the region, but before the site was discovered no finds had been documented. The site lay exposed close to a local road between the village and the parish church. The farmer who owned the field was incapacitated due to an accident a couple of



months earlier, and the looters had been able to work without fear of observation from the neighboring farm. The 200-250 spade-dug pits in the field revealed that the looters must have been working for an extended time. The extent of the looting indicated that multiple looters were involved, possibly with a lookout to sound the alarm if someone came by the nearby road. A minor test excavation in the field did not reveal any signs of prehistoric cultural remains, so hopefully the looters labored in vain.

In all, archeologists estimate that about 3 percent of the area surveyed had been looted but, without having enlisted locals, the percentage would have been larger. The lure of precious metals, the possibility of locating unusual prehistoric artifacts, and the ease with which looters can gain access to a relatively unprotected area with publicized sites militate against protection and conservation. Despite the protection of the law, neighbors and local history groups must be recruited to provide casual surveillance of cultural resources. Government authorities must work to convince citizens that buried artifacts constitute much of their cultural heritage, and that citizens, in fact, own the resource.

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